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CHAPTER IV

RICE, WORK, & WEALTH

773 776 ACCORDING TO LEGEND, the Balinese originally had only the juice of sugar-cane as food. Out of pity for the human race, the male god of fertility and water, Wisnu, Plutonic Lord of the Underworld, came to earth in disguise to provide them with better food. He raped an unwilling Mother Earth to fertilize her and give birth to rice, and she became known as Sanghyang Ibu Pretiwi, the Smitten Grandmother. Then Wisnu made war on Indra, Lord of the Heavens, to induce him to teach men how to grow rice. Thus, as the principal source of life and wealth and as a gift from the gods, rice was born from the cosmic union of the divine male and female creative forces represented in earth and water.

776 773 822 [243] Besides white rice (*bras*), there are red (*gaga*) and black (*indjin*) varieties. These the Balinese conveniently co-ordinated with their symbolic notion of the relation between colour and direction by the explanation that the seeds were provided by Sanghyang Kesuhum Kidul (Brahma), the patron of the South, who sent four doves with seeds of the four cardinal colours: white, red, yellow, and black. Since there was no yellow rice, the seed of that colour became tumeric (*kunyit*), an important condiment. [263]

262 776 Poor people, or those living in districts where water is not abundant, live on corn and sweet potatoes, foods considered in-

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preside over the kitchen. It is called *brahma*, not the supreme lord of the Hindus, but simply meaning "fire," an animistic fire god.

The food that Balinese gourmets eat at festivals is as elaborate as any in the world and will be described later in detail, but the daily meal is extremely simple. A mound of boiled cold rice with salt and chili-pepper was sufficient, our house-boy Dog claimed, to keep body and soul together for a Balinese like himself. The daily diet of Gusti and his noble family was the same cold white rice (*nasi*, a synonym for food in general), helped, however, by a side dish of vegetables chopped together with a dozen or so of spices, aromatics, grated coconut and the hottest chili-pepper in the world.

Gusti's wives did the cooking; Siloh Biang prepared the rice while Sagung scraped coconut in a *kikian*, a board bristling with little iron points, chopped the ingredients for the sauce, or fried them in coconut oil in an iron pan (*pengorengan*). Some eat their daily rice simply boiled in a clay pot, but in our household they preferred it steamed; they washed the grain repeatedly until the waters lost their milky colour and came out transparent, boiled it for a while, and when it was half done put it into a funnel-shaped basket (*kukusan*) covered with a heavy clay lid (*kekeb*) and steamed the whole over a special pot (*dangdang*) of boiling water. From time to time some of the boiling water was poured over the rice with a ladle of coconut shell to prevent it from drying up and sticking together. The result was a deliciously dry, separate rice that served as a medium for the peppery sauces. The food was prepared with cleanliness, everything carefully washed first, and the food covered until eaten with squares of banana leaf.

As soon as the rice was done, they prepared a tray of offerings (*ngedjot*) for the spirits that haunt the house: little squares of banana leaf, each with a few grains of rice, a flower, salt, and a dash of chili-pepper. No one could eat before the little portions were distributed in front of each of the house units: at the en-

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thing. They were continually eating at odd hours, buying strange-looking foods at public eating-booths, in the market, at the crossroads, and particularly at festivals when the food-vendors did a rushing business in chopped mixtures, peanuts, and bright pink drinks. Every day a young vendor came into the compound and invariably found many customers. For five cents she served a large piece of delicious roast chicken with a strong sauce, accompanied by a package of rice that sold for an extra penny. Even small children, accustomed to look out for themselves, bought their snacks from the street vendors, waiting silently for their orders to be mashed and wrapped in neat little packages of banana leaf, paying for them with the *kepengs* they kept tied in their sashes.

Balinese food is difficult for the palate of a Westerner. Besides being served cold always, food is considered uneatable unless it is violently flavoured with a crushed variety of pungent spices, aromatic roots and leaves, nuts, onions, garlic, fermented fish paste, lemon juice, grated coconut, and burning red peppers. It was so hot that it made even me, a Mexican raised on chili-peppers, cry and break out in beads of perspiration. But after the first shocks, and when we became accustomed to Balinese flavours, we developed into Balinese gourmets and soon started trying out strange new combinations. Siloh Biang understood our appreciation of their delicacies and often brought Rose new dishes to taste. Babies are fed the peppery food as soon as they are weaned and will not touch food without spices and peppers. Most Europeans, used to beef and boiled potatoes, simply cannot eat Balinese food, but on the other hand no Balinese of the average class can be induced even to touch European food, which is *nyam-nyam* to them – that is, " flat and tasteless."

A Brahmanic priest we occasionally visited told us that under no circumstances may Balinese eat the following: " human flesh, tigers, monkeys, dogs, crocodiles, mice, snakes, frogs, certain poisonous fish, leeches, stinging insects, crows, eagles, owls, and in general all birds with moustaches"! We assured him nobody